

# Bridging the Gap

NIALL DEBUILTEAR DESCRIBES FLAX ARTS STUDIOS GRADUATE RESIDENCY PROGRAMME.



Niall DeBuitlear's studio at Flax Art, with various works in progress.

**THE** Flax Art Studios Graduate Residency programme is open to graduates from BA or MA courses in Ireland or the UK. I read about the residency on their website and it seemed like a good opportunity to bridge the gap between art college and a career as a professional artist. My application was successful and I have been based here since October 2006. A place on the residency was also awarded to Leo Devlin, a graduate of the University of Ulster. The residency involves studio space for one year with access to a communal workshop area and computer facilities, a materials allowance; and regular meetings with an arts professional to discuss the practical side of being an artist.

In the immediate six months or so after leaving DIT last year, I participated in a number of group shows. Most of the work I showed was taken from my graduate show, with some of it being reworked and expanded upon. I worked from home during this period, but produced little new work, apart from a series of digital drawings – which I installed in a display case in Fisheries Tower in Galway during the 'Artisit?' events in October 2006. I believe this lull in the production of work was largely due to the lack of a dedicated workspace and partly due to a degree kind of post-college fatigue. I never had much work space allocated in art college – but having none at all was an unworkable situation. I was working part-time in a shop and the only way I could afford a studio would have been to work full time – which would have been counter-productive as I'd not have had adequate time to make work in it. This is a catch 22 that seems to affect many young artists trying to establish a practice in Dublin. I was generally considered to be a 'conceptual artist' – so people were always telling me things like "Sure, you don't need a studio anyway" – to which I would reluctantly concede with an unconvinced shrug.

On being offered the residency at Flax Art, I decided to make the move to Belfast for at least one year to take advantage of the opportunity. The beginning of the residency was a difficult time for me; and the first few months were unproductive. I've little work to show from this time – and all of the ideas for potential projects I had before beginning the residency were scrapped. After having spent the preceding six months without producing much and with previous approaches to making work beginning to fail me, I felt uncertain about how to proceed. Offers to exhibit tapered off after an initial post-end-of-year-show flurry; and having re-shown most of my graduate work at least once in one form or another, I decided to curtail my applications



Niall DeBuitlear *Assembly*, woven cable ties

for group shows and focus on the development of a new body of work. I needed to clarify for myself the kind of artist I wanted to be and to develop a more focused practice. A change was definitely called for.

An interest in the ephemeral traces we leave behind in an urban environment has always been an aspect of my practice. Some of previous work involved using photography and drawing to document these traces and leftovers of various human activities on the streets of Dublin. I had also worked with installation using found objects for my project *The Found Bookmark Archive*. This project involved the collection of found objects from between the pages of library books and the presentation of these objects in installations and artist's books. The first significant work I made in Belfast involved the collection of small blue pens used in bookies while walking around the city centre. This transitional work was a performative piece, where the pens were fitted together to form a growing, swaying column – which eventually became unstable and collapsed.

After this work I began to produce sculptural objects using found materials mostly collected from the street or from skips. Sculpture has always been the medium that interested me most in terms of looking at other artist's work, but it was something I never really got to grips with in any significant way while at art college. The city is for me a source of both materials and inspiration. My materials – such as bookies' pens, cardboard boxes and plastic crates, are often collected on walks around the city.

In my current work I am primarily concerned with the production of forms from found objects. The sculptures I make are essentially abstract – but are suggestive of cells, fungi, landscapes, cityscapes, graphs, vessels, phalluses and standing figures. I use a variety of variety of simple techniques to construct my work. I have become increasingly interested in traditional craft techniques and the potential for applying these techniques to disposable modern materials. I have made a number of pieces using simple basket-weaving techniques such as *Assembly*, a group of freestanding forms woven from cable ties which I have cut down from lampposts and poles where they were left behind after election posters had been removed.

Outside of the art college environment in many ways I have found it easier to experiment with my work and take more risks (though perhaps this is what art college should really be about). There

is not the sense, as there can be at college that your work is being judged while still in its early stages and before you yourself have formed a definite judgement on it. The fact that there are no marks at the end removes the competitive element, pressure to do well, and fear of failure that this can lead to. I was afforded the time and space to make my own critical judgements about my practice without any intrusions. The input and opinions of your peers is an important aspect of art college but it certainly did feel good to be able to be able to work without this. Perhaps, if I felt that a certain amount freedom was lacking in art college, that may have been partly my own failing or perhaps it is inevitable that the nature of an academic institution enforces certain restrictions.

At Flax Art there are a number of large studios downstairs and several smaller open plan spaces upstairs where my studio is located. My studio, while being relatively small, is still the biggest space I have worked in so far. There is 24-hour access to the studios which has allowed me to maximise the free time I have available and fit my work around the hours required at my part-time job. As well as having my own studio space, the residency includes access to the communal workshop area where there is the opportunity to work on a larger scale than my studio would comfortably accommodate. There is an excellent range of equipment available for use in the workshop. I have access to a communal computer area where I can use the internet and some basic software including Photoshop. I also have the use of an offline computer in my space on which I can run any programs that I like. The computers are quite old, though they do meet most of my basic needs.

The 'mentoring' sessions with Peter Richards have been very useful. Peter, given his years of experience as both an artist and curator/gallery director, has provided some interesting and enlightening insights into the various application and selection processes involved in being a professional artist. These meetings have always involved positive and open discussions – which I hope will help me to better present my work in a professional context. With Leo Devlin, I have successfully applied for a two-person show at Queen Street Studios, which opens in mid-September. I am currently working towards a solo show in the project space at Dublin City Council's gallery The Lab in November – which I was awarded as a part of the 'Launch / Making Do' exhibition and awards programme. I have also been invited to Lithuania in early October to produce an installation at CAC in Vilnius, as a part of an event involving a number of Irish artists. In May, Flax Art participated in the 'art(Tour)ist' event which involved most of the studios in Belfast opening their doors to visits from the public at which I think the response to my work was generally good.

At the time of writing, I have developed a body of new work from which there is plenty to draw from for the shows in Dublin and Belfast. I have also now got a solid portfolio of images with which to seek out new opportunities to make and show work. I am currently seeking a solo exhibition opportunity for 2008. My first year out of art college has been a very positive and productive one – thanks in no small part to the residency at Flax. The most important thing I have gained from the residency has been the time and space to produce new work independent of an academic environment. I feel I have begun the difficult transition from art student to professional artist and am optimistic about the prospect of my second year out of Art College.

Niall DeBuitlear

<http://www.p-art-icles.com/niall>  
<http://www.flaxartstudios.org>

**CEAD**  
 continuing education in art and design

**Continuing Education in Art & Design NCAD**

**AUTUMN PROGRAMME**  
 Part time non credit and award bearing courses commence October 2007.

For full details and a brochure  
[www.ncad.ie](http://www.ncad.ie) (Lifelong Learning)  
 email: [cead@ncad.ie](mailto:cead@ncad.ie)

NCAD, 100 Thomas Street, Dublin 8  
 For brochure phone: 01 636 4214

**Platform 2**  
 dis-/re+place

Shane Cullen	Rhona Byrne	Paul McAree
Alan Phelan	Denis McNulty	Fiona Dowling
Ursula Burke	Christine Mackey	Mary McIntyre
Paddy Bloomer	Nina Tanis	+many more...

Curated By: **Niamh Smyth**, MA Visual Arts Practice, IADT  
 Venue: 'Knockbride House', Knockbride East, Bailieborough, Co. Cavan, Ireland

Contact: Phone: +353 (0)42 966 6666  
 Fax: +353 (0)42 966 6669

**Opening Saturday 10th November 2007 @ 8pm**

arts council  
 a chomhairle ealaíon